

Lessons

10

Things You Gotta
Do to Play Like

**STEVE
VAI**

BY JESSE GRESS

"HIS NAME IS STEVIE VAI, and he's a crazy guy." Frank Zappa's opening lyric from "Stevie's Spanking" may have been intended to reference Steve Vai's offstage antics, but it's also an accurate portrayal of his extraordinary musical explorations and cunning guitar stunts. But don't mistake him for a mere shredder: Vai is a serious composer and his music comes from deep and spiritual place. From achingly beautiful balladry to orchestral grandeur to balls-out heavy-metal that rocks harder than a herd of cows in the wind, Vai can make us laugh, cry, or fudge our undies, all in the same song.





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Born in 1960, Vai started playing at 13 and eventually began taking lessons from Long Island buddy Joe Satriani. At 17, Vai enrolled at Boston's Berklee College of Music and became immersed in transcribing the music of Frank Zappa. A year later he became Zappa's official transcriptionist—a three-year task that culminated with the publication of *The Frank Zappa Guitar Book*—and by 1980, Vai joined Zappa's band for a two-year stint as "stunt guitarist." (Zappa himself referred to Vai as his "little Italian virtuoso.") In 1983, Vai set the guitar world on its ear, releasing a groundbreaking, self-produced solo album in two parts—*Flex-Able* on a 12" LP, and *Flex-Able Leftovers* on a 10" EP. He followed up in 1990 with the even more astounding *Passion & Warfare*. In the time between these two solo projects, Vai replaced Yngwie Malmsteen in Alcatraz (writing and recording the guitarific *Disturbing the Peace*), absolutely killed alongside bassist Billy Sheehan in the David Lee Roth Band (*Eat 'Em & Smile* and *Skyscraper*), recorded with John Lydon's Public Image Ltd. (*Album*), and joined Whitesnake for the *Slip of the Tongue* album. And lest we forget, Vai played the seriously cool role of Jack Butler, the devil's advocate in the 1986 film *Crossroads*.

Since then, Vai has been one busy dude. The solo albums and EPs kept coming—*Sex & Religion* (1993), *Alien Love Secrets* (1995), *Fire Garden* (1996), *The Ultra Zone* (1999), and *Real Illusions: Reflections* (2005)—as did multiple G3 tours with Joe Satriani, Eric Johnson, Yngwie, and John Petrucci; orchestral gigs in Japan, Europe, and the U.S.; sessions and collaborations with dozens of artists as diverse as Alice Cooper, the Yardbirds, Meat Loaf, Mike Stern, Spinal Tap, and Sharon Isbin; numerous film scores; a couple of Experience Hendrix tours; and a host of compilations in *The Elusive Light and Sound* series. Vai also runs two recording studios (the Mothership and the Harmony Hut), his own record label (Favored Nations), and somehow still finds time to be a professional beekeeper!

Vai has certainly gone through tons of gear—including some awesome instruments from Fender, Jackson, Charvel, Performance, and Joe Despagni (remember the "intergalactic puke" model from the "Yankee Rose" video?)—but in recent years he has relied primarily on his signature line of guitars and amps—Ibanez 6-string JEM and the 7-string Universe axes, and Carvin Legacy

series amps—and a few pedals, among them a Keeley-modded Boss DS-1, an Ibanez Tube Screamer and Gemini Distortion, a Digi-Tech Whammy, and the Morley Bad Horsie wah, which also bears his name. 'Nuff said.

To play like Vai, you've gotta think like Vai, and to think like Vai, you've gotta practice what he practiced. I know y'all are anxious to get on the field and kill the guy with the ball, but first, you've gotta...

1

PRACTICE YOUR BUTT OFF

The old proverb "practice makes perfect" has rarely rung truer. Steve Vai has probably logged more practice hours in a single year than most of us do in a lifetime. There's simply no other way to get *that* good. "I used to divide my day into about 12 hours," Vai told *GP* way back in February 1983, when asked to describe his practice routine. "The first nine hours were divided into three equal sections. For the first hour, I would do a series of exercises to develop my fingering. Then I would go through all the scales and modes, and I would write synthetic scales and learn them. Then I would harmonize them and break the chords down. At the end of it all, I would just play." In addition to his Berklee curriculum and Zappa records, Vai studied from Ted Greene's *Chord Chemistry*, and *Rhythms* by drummer Gary Chaffe. "Chaffe's book will open up the advanced reader to odd rhythms," he advises. Regarding technique, Vai maintains that "chops aren't everything, but they are very important to a musician because, if you can use them maturely and control them, they give you authority." And for Vai, practicing and teaching go hand-in-hand. That's why you've gotta...

2

TEACH BY EXAMPLE

"I love teaching," admits Vai. "It's one of my favorite pastimes, but I only like to teach students who are *really* willing to learn and to blow up the bridge. You have to inspire them." And so he did. Vai has recently teamed up with Berklee to co-author a 12-week online course titled *Steve Vai Guitar Techniques*, but much of his past teaching was by example—just one listen to

Flex-Able or *Passion & Warfare* sent throngs of slack-jawed 6- and 7-stringers scurrying back to the woodshed. "Whenever I am working on something, I break it down into small pieces and make exercises out of every little piece," Vai revealed to *GP* this past April. "When I first started doing that, it didn't come that easily. What I would do—and what I recommend you do—is musical meditation. That means really focusing on something until it sounds exactly like what you are hoping for." In addition to isolating and repeating small sections of long, difficult passages, Vai's practice routine for turning small sections of new musical ideas into exercises must certainly involve melodic permutation, different harmonic applications, and rhythmic variations. Today, we'll be concentrating on the first two techniques, and applying them to short excerpts from a wide variety of Vai licks, beginning with the *Dm7*-based sextuplets shown in **Ex. 1a**, which not only demonstrate Vai's liquid legato technique, but also map a melodic strategy that can be adapted to six other diatonically related chords (i.e., chords derived from the same key). Here's how it works: First, we determine a key center, or parent scale, from which the lick fragment was born. In this case, the chord symbol and major key signature point to C, where *Dm7* resides as the II chord, making this a *D Dorian* run. (Tip: The B is the giveaway: *D Aeolian*, or natural minor, would contain a *Bb*.) Lowering each note of **Ex. 1a** to its neighboring C major scale step yields the run presented in **Ex. 1b**, which works great with *Cmaj7*, the neighboring I chord, while diatonically raising each note gives us the Phrygian-flavored line illustrated in **Ex. 1c**, a perfect fit for *Em7*, the upper-neighbor III chord. Of course, the fingering will change slightly for each transposition, making some permutations trickier to play than the original line, but that's part of the challenge of pushing your limitations. **Examples 1d-1g** follow suit with diatonic transpositions to *F Lydian* (over *Fmaj7*, the IV chord), *G Mixolydian* (over *G7*, the V chord), *A Aeolian* (over *Am7*, the VI chord), and *B Locrian* (over *Bm7b5*, the VII chord), respectively. Got it? The idea here is that, just as chords can be voice-led, any melody can be revoiced as a diatonic neighbor, and when enough are acquired, they may be strung together into melodic sequences that work for all of a key's diatonic modes. It all begins when you...

Ex. 1a

♩ = ca. 130

Dm7(II) sim.

T
A
B

Ex. 1b

♩ = ca. 130

Cmaj7(I)

T
A
B

Ex. 1c

Em7(III)

Ex. 1d

♩ = ca. 130

Fmaj7(IV)

T
A
B

Ex. 1e

G7(V)

Ex. 1f

♩ = ca. 130

Am7(VI)

T
A
B

Ex. 1g

Bm7♭5(VII)

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3 CALL YOUR MOTHER
I've dubbed this method of extrapolating multiple lines from a single melodic line, the "mother lick" concept. We begin with a designated melodic line that acts as

the so-called "mother" lick from which all others are derived, suss its parent scale and map its melodic line form, and then re-apply it beginning on every note in that key, just as you would with chordal voice leading. For **Ex. 2a**, we're using another sextuplet-based *Dm* run, but this time it's laced

with pull-offs and slides, skips a few scale tones, and is derived from the key of *F* (evidenced by the tell-tale *Bb* in the key sig), where *Dm* is the VI chord. This means that moving each note down one diatonic scale step results in a *C7* V-chord lick, as in **Ex. 2b**. Working backwards to the IV, III, II, I, and VII chords, we respectively get a cool *Bbmaj7* Lydian line (**Ex. 2c**), a Phrygian-based *Am7* line (**Ex. 2d**), a Dorian-flavored *Gm7* II-chord lick (**Ex. 2e**), an *Fmaj7* Ionian run (**Ex. 2f**), and a Locrian *Em7b5* lick in **Ex. 2g**. (Tip: Try the last one over *C7*). You're on

Ex. 2a

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 130$ *Dm7*(VI)

Ex. 2b

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 130$ *C7*(V)

Ex. 2c

Bbmaj7(IV)

Ex. 2d

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 130$ *Am7*(III)

Ex. 2e

Gm7(II) *loco*

Ex. 2f

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 130$ *Fmaj7*(I)

Ex. 2g

Em7b5(VII)

your own for **Ex. 2h** (Shades of Jeff Beck's version of "Going Down"!), which offers a two-bar, D Lydian-based IV-chord lick ripe for D.I.Y. permuting through the key of A. Have at it, but don't hurt yourself! And when you're done...

4 BE FLEX-ABLE & OPEN WIDE

Ex. 3a portrays Vai's penchant for wide, intervallic melodies, embellished here with a couple of strategically placed whammy bar

dips. (Tip: Make a repetitive exercise out of those whammy-inflected ascending Am and C arpeggios on the last two beats in bar 1.) This "mother" lick, primarily built from ascending fourth and fifth intervals, may have originated over a II-V-I progression in F (Gm7-B \flat /C-Fmaj9), but as we've witnessed, it may also be permuted. Check it out: If we treat **Ex. 3a** as a I-chord lick, then moving each note up to its upper-neighbor scale tone should give us a nice Gm7/9, II-chord lick. **Ex. 3b** proves the point, while **Examples 3c** and **3d** utilize consecutive F scale tones, and extend the process

to cover the III (Am7/9) and IV (B \flat maj7/9) chords. Also try this for the V, VI, and VII chords (C7, Dm7, and Em7 \flat 5)—just play by the rules and you'll be fine.

5 DEVELOP EYES IN YOUR FINGERS

Just because these diatonic licks are sequential, they certainly don't have to sound mechanical. "Every note has to have its own zip code, its own life, its own personality," Vai recently theorized in *GP*, and the concept can certainly

Ex. 2h

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 132$ D(IV) E(V)

Ex. 3a

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 100$ Gm7(II) B \flat /C(V) Fmaj9(I)

Ex. 3b

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 100$ Gm7/9(II)

Ex. 3c

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 100$ Am7/9(III)

Ex. 3d

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 100$ B \flat maj7/9(IV)

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be applied to **Ex. 4a**'s mother lick. Here, we alternate ascending and descending whole-step grace- and sixteenth-note slides that converge from both directions. Designed to create an *F* Lydian tonality (*F* is the IV chord in the key of *C*), this totally symmetrical pattern also works well with *G7*, the V chord. **Ex. 4b** transforms the lick into a repetitive

all-sixteenth exercise, while **Examples 4c-4f** are diatonically transposed to cover the I, II, III, and IV chords (*Cmaj7*, *Dm7*, *Em7*, and *Fmaj7*). Note that while the shapes of these permutations are no longer symmetrical, each one creates a unique design on the fretboard. Learn where they live, as you'll want to visit them often.

6 RAISE THE BAR
Hendrix, Beck, Bolin, and Van Halen may have previously whipped out a few sporadic pentatonic/blue-based melodies on their respective wangs, but Vai was the first guy to literally raise the bar

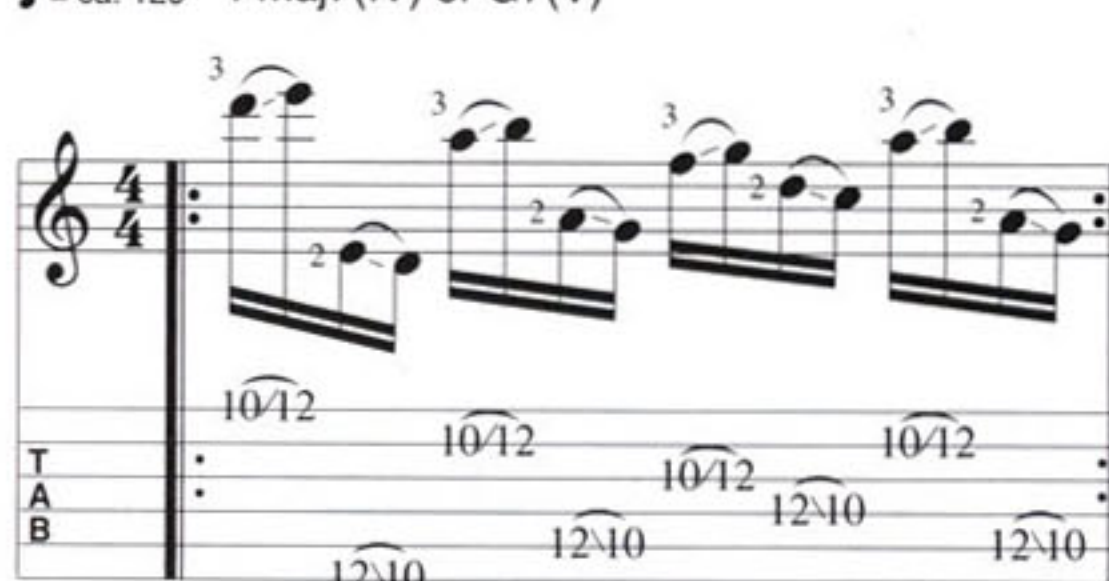
Ex. 4a

♩ = ca. 120 *Fmaj7*(IV) or *G7*(V)



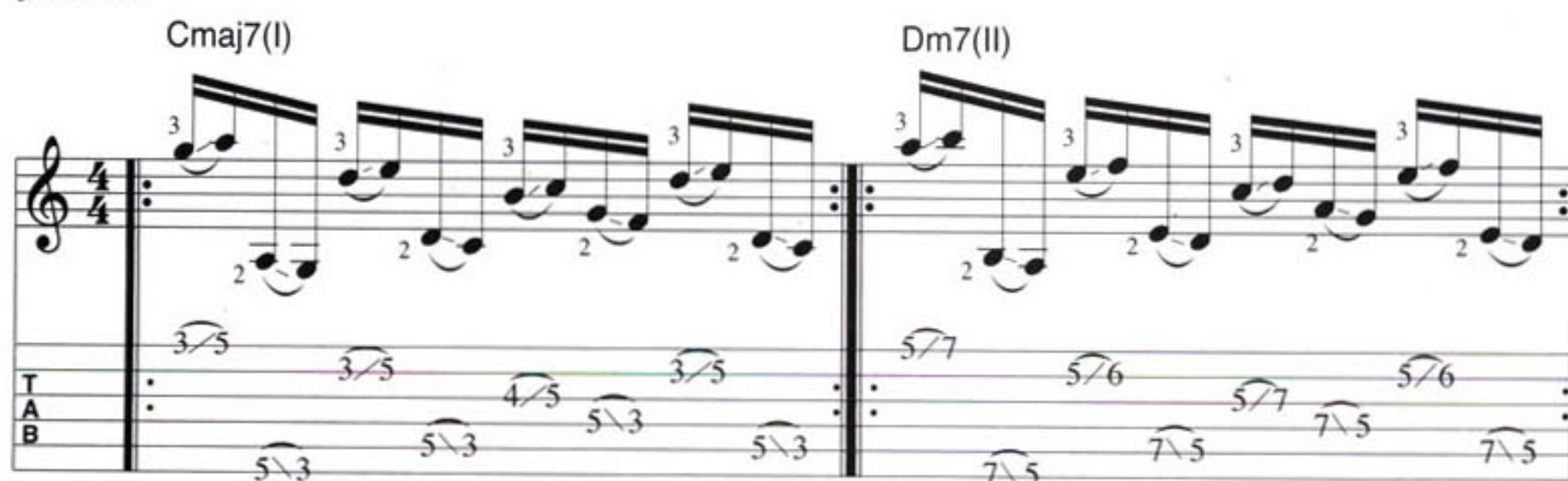
Ex. 4b

♩ = ca. 120 *Fmaj7*(IV) or *G7*(V)

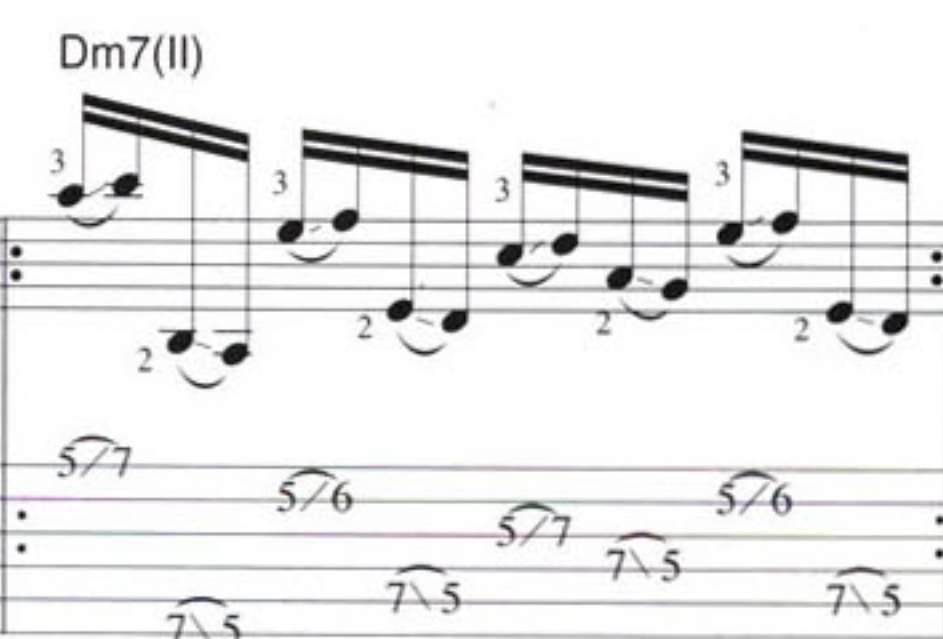


Ex. 4c

♩ = ca. 120



Ex. 4d

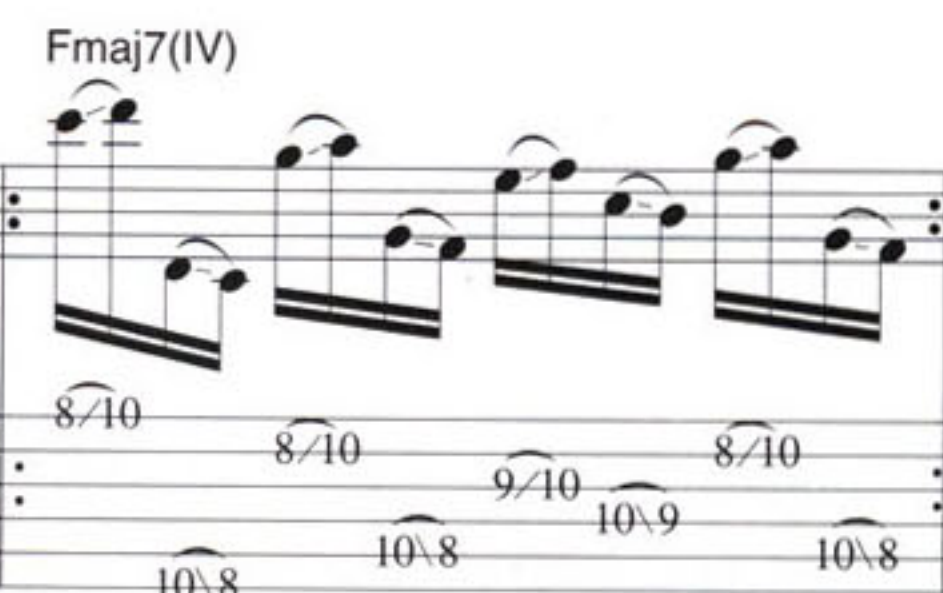


Ex. 4e

♩ = ca. 120



Ex. 4f



SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



The Frank Zappa
Guitar Book



Flex-Able



Flex-Able
Leftovers



Passion and
Warfare



Sex and
Religion



Alien Love
Secrets



The Man from
Utopia



The Ultra Zone

to new heights, as first heard right here in the pages of *GP* when we presented his ground-breaking “The Attitude Song” on a flexi-disc insert back in good ol’ 1983.

Ex. 5a grabs one glorious moment from the tune—a single G harmonic bar-bent in

both directions to five discrete pitches—and turns it into a harmonic mother lick ripe for permuting. (Tip: The original version starts on the *and* of beat three.) While Vai’s lick is Mixolydian in origin, we’ll use **Ex. 5b**’s D-Major/A-Mixo scale played

entirely with natural harmonics to produce our diatonic *Em* (II), *F#m* (III), *G* (IV), *A* (V), *Bm* (VI), and *C#dim* (VII) transpositions. Get ready to flex your ear muscles, because **Examples 5c-5h** will test your intonation to the max!

Ex. 5a

♩ = ca. 120 D(I)

Ex. 5b

Ex. 5c

♩ = ca. 120 *Em*(II)

Ex. 5d

♩ = ca. 120 *C#dim*(VII)

Ex. 5e

♩ = ca. 120 *Bm*(VI)

Ex. 5f

♩ = ca. 120 *A7*(V)

Ex. 5g

♩ = ca. 120 *G*(IV)

Ex. 5h

♩ = ca. 120 *F#m*(III)

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7 TAP DANCE

Vai's two-handed tapping excursions range from the sublime to the ridiculous. Serving as an intermediate-level primer, **Ex. 6a** features a tapped, two-bar, A Aeolian lick that begins with a measure-long, four-note sequence of descending sixteenths, all played on a single string and each phrased

with two pull-offs and a slide, and then segues into a trio of A pentatonic-minor-based quintuplets. Our mother lick extracts the first two quintuplets in bar 2 for transformation into a repetitive, 2/4 workout over all seven chords diatonic to the key of C over the course of **Examples 6b** through **6h**. The tapped, A-based mother figure in **Ex. 6i** creates a lovely, harmonic veil effect. (Tip: Turn on your delay and enhance it with a single,

eighth-note repeat mixed 50-50.) Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to put the lick through its diatonic paces over its relative Bm (II), C#m (III), D (IV), E (V), F#m (VI), and G#dim (VII) chords (or their seventh chord counterparts) until you absolutely own it. For extra credit, go back and use tapped slides to play Examples 4b-4f. (Yow!) O.K., that's enough permuting to keep you busy for a few years. Now, let's...

Ex. 6a

♩ = ca. 150

Am7

T T T T T T T T

14 12 10 9 12 10 9 7 10 9 7 5 9 7 5 4 7 5 7 5 2 7 5 7 5 2 7 5 7 5 3 0

Ex. 6b

♩ = ca. 150 Am7(VI)

T T T T T T T T

7 5 7 5 2 7 5 7 5 2 9 7 9 7 4 9 7 9 7 3 10 9 10 9 5 10 9 10 9 5

Ex. 6c

Bm7b5(VII)

Ex. 6d

Cmaj7(I)

Ex. 6e

♩ = ca. 150 Dm7(II)

T T T T T T T T

12 10 12 10 7 12 10 12 10 7 14 12 14 12 9 14 12 14 12 9 16 14 16 14 10 15 14 15 14 10 17 16 17 16 12 17 15 17 15 12

Ex. 6f

Em7(III)

Ex. 6g

Fmaj7(IV)

Ex. 6h

G7(V)

Ex. 6i

♩ = ca. 122 A(I)

T T T T T T T T

14 7 5 14 7 5 14 7 5 14 7 6 14 7

8

GET RICH

Harmonically, that is, as in dense harmonies like the ones Vai uses to decorate **Ex. 7a**'s signature melody from "Answers," from *Passion & Warfare*. (Fact: Vai also used this figure on the *Flex-Able* and *Alcatrazz* albums.) The deceptive riff superimposes 7/8 and 9/8—that's a total of 16 eighth-notes—over two bars of straight 4/4 drums. Vai runs the melody through several keys over the course of the song before arriving at this E Lydian, key-of-B version. **Ex. 7b** shows Vai's triadic treatment of the

harmony, but **Ex. 7c** adds a secret high-cal ingredient that makes the listener feel all warm and fuzzy: A fourth harmony part built off of the 6 (C#). Got it down? Good! Now move 'em all up an octave (either mechanically or electronically) before we...

9

BOLDLY GO WHERE NO MAN HAS GONE BEFORE

The wackiest tool in Vai's music box—and there are many—would have to be his "speech guitar" à la "The Audience Is Listening" (*Passion &*

Warfare) and "Ya-Yo Gakk" (from 1995's *Alien Love Secrets*), where he literally duplicates on the guitar phrases spoken by an old school teacher and his young son. In fact, "The Dangerous Kitchen" and "The Jazz Discharge Party Hats" (both from Zappa's *The Man from Utopia*), along with "So Happy" (from Vai's *Flex-Able*) once drove me to spend countless hours transcribing a Tom Carvel "Tom the Turkey" Thanksgiving ice-cream-cake commercial ca. 1985! (It's time consuming and lonely work, but I'd recommend it to anyone crazy enough to put in the effort.) Since these priceless moments tend to defy transcription, we'll

Ex. 7a

♩ = ca. 214

Eadd9

1st x - - -

2nd x - - -

TAB

12 7 7 7 11 9 7(9/11) 7 7 7 11 9 7 9/11 7 7 9 11 (11)

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Ex. 7b

♩ = ca. 214

Eadd9

1st x - - -

2nd x - - -

TAB

12 12 12 12 11 9 7 12 12 12 12 11 9 7 12 12 12 11 9 7 5 7 7 7 7 9 11 (11)
13 13 13 13 13 11 9 8 13 13 13 11 9 8 13 13 13 11 9 8 6 8 8 8 9 11 (11)
14 14 14 14 14 13 11 9 9 13 13 13 11 9 9 13 13 13 11 9 7 9 9 9 11 13 (13)

Ex. 7c

♩ = ca. 214

Eadd9

1st x - - -

2nd x - - -

TAB

9 5 5 5 9 7 5 (7/9) 5 5 5 9 7 5 8/9 5 5 7 9 (9)

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Ex. 8a

Ex. 8b

♩ = ca. 132

Ex. 8c

♩ = ca. 132 (A)
N.C.

Ex. 9a

♩ = ca. 100 Emadd9

zone in on the easier-to-notate, but no less zany, chromatically ascending major triads (D up to A) played over a descending chromatic bass line (E down to A), outlined first in **Ex. 8a**'s chord grids, and then applied in **Ex. 8b** to a snippet that paraphrases a few seconds of the terrifyingly tremendous "Kill the Guy with the Ball," perhaps Vai's most fearsome instrumental since "The Attitude Song." **Ex. 8c** reveals how Vai used a similar, albeit more consonant version of this technique for the fingerstyle, boogie rhythm figure from "The Audience Is Listening." Finally, you've gotta...

10

DO IT FOR THE LOVE

We'll wrap up with a quartet of excerpts quoted verbatim from Vai's cerebral love ballad "For the Love of God," from *Passion & Warfare*. (Fact: Vai altered his consciousness by fasting for a week before recording the lead track in a single pass.) **Ex. 9a** presents a six-note, upper-register, *Em*-based hemiola that alternates

MORE ONLINE



- An unreal performance of "For the Love of God." Good god!
- Rare footage of Vai at GIT in 1985.
- "The Attitude Song" y'all!

Get these links and more at guitarplayer.com/march2012

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between *D* and *B* starting notes. Feel free to permute at will, or just play it as it stands.

Ex. 9b, played over the song's bridge changes, features a recurring, one-bar theme, phrased first with slides (bar 1), and then decorated with whammy dips on the first three downbeats of bar 2. **Ex. 9c** continues over the same chord set contrasting a speedy sixteenth- and thirty-second-note motif that combines ascending *As*, *Bs*, *Ds*, *Es*, and *F#s* in the first half of each beat with a constant *G-B-D* pedal

maneuver in the second half. Starting on the last two beats of bar 3, Vai begins a series of blindingly fast, swept *Em7* arpeggios that extend for two more bars of *Dsus2*. Finally, we conclude with **Ex. 9d**, where Vai injects a whole lot o' soul into the song's *Emadd9-Fmaj7#11*-based melody via pinched harmonics, decelerating triplet rhythms, legato phrasing, and melodic whammy bar work. Check out how Vai's final whammy bend lands on a sweet spot: *A*, the 3 of the underlying *F* major-based

harmony of the moment. Too cool!

Sure, this is a lot to chew on, but think of it this way: We end up with only a handful of documented Vai licks, but we've discovered a million ways to exploit them, and after all, isn't that what it's all about? For a bit of side-splitting comedy relief, search "Steve Vai Shreds" on the YouTube to witness how humor certainly does belong in music. Thanks, Frank, and thanks, Steve, for helping us unlock our inner Vai! 

Ex. 9b

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 50$ *G*

Ex. 9c

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 80$ *G*

Ex. 9d

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 50$ *Emadd9*

"For The Love Of God"
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